# The Angel of Peace

By MARY E. WILKINS FREEMAN

*"Elizabeth Knox stood up and faced the others with a grand air. 'We gave because we loved you,' she said."*

*"The firelight shone upon them all—enemies who had loved, not hated, after that old contention had died."*

ELLEN was embroidering. Her Aunt Elizabeth Knox was mending some black kid gloves. Her Aunt Sarah was playing solitaire.

Ellen, their only brother's daughter, had come to live with her aunts in Blairville after her father's death. She had a lovely face, with a clear profile. Although recently bereaved, she was not dressed in black. She also looked happy. Her father had been a happy philosopher, and his daughter had inherited much from him.

Ellen Knox was enthusiastic about Blairville and its people. As she embroidered she said: "Blairville and its people are charming."

Her Aunt Sarah looked up from her solitaire. "We feel so glad, my dear, that you like the people here," she said. "We have always considered them most desirable."

THEN Ellen asked a question that immediately changed the complacent expression upon her aunts' faces. "Why was the village called Blairville?" she said.

The sisters hesitated. Ellen looked wonderingly from one to the other.

"I suppose it was called Blairville on account of the Blair family," Sarah finally replied reluctantly.

"Was it a very large, important family?"

"Not more so than other families."

"Are none of the family left here?" asked Ellen. "I don't seem to remember meeting anybody named Blair."

Sarah stole another look at her sister's grim face. Then she replied, "Yes, there are two Blair girls, Esther and Catherine."

Ellen looked up. "I am quite sure I have met no girls named Blair."

"They are not girls," snapped Elizabeth Knox. "They are women as old as we are. Sister said 'girls' because we used to call them so when they were girls."

"Oh," said Ellen. "And they never go anywhere?"

Sarah glanced at Elizabeth. "Catherine is not strong. She has not been for years," said she. "And Esther—well, I think—perhaps they have not much to do with. Esther Blair used to be a beauty."

"I never thought she was a beauty," said Elizabeth.

"She was called one," said Sarah.

Ellen laid down her embroidery and looked out of the window upon a broad field. On the farther side, set like a dim etching among leafless trees of great age, stood a large house. A faint cloud of smoke rose from one of the huge chimneys. The field between was treeless and uninteresting, save for one thing. In its exact middle was a strip of land six feet wide, bordered with a box hedge.

"Is not that the house where the Blairs live?" asked Ellen.

"It is," replied Elizabeth.

"Why is that strip in the center of the field hedged off?" asked Ellen, "and who owns it?"

Then Elizabeth and Sarah spoke at once: "We own it. Our father, and your grandfather, left it to us."

"Then why—" began Ellen.

"She may as well be told," said Elizabeth to Sarah, who nodded assent.

"YOUR Aunt Sarah and I claim that we own that strip of land, and Esther and Catherine Blair claim they own it," said Elizabeth. "We own the field on this side, and they own the field on the other side. None of us have ever disputed that. But about twenty years ago the Blair girls, who had lost money, had a chance to sell a house-lot on that field; and they had it surveyed, and we had ours surveyed, and the old deeds were examined. And the outcome was, your Aunt Sarah and I remained convinced that we owned our field, including that strip of land, and the Blair girls were convinced they owned it. So we, both parties, agreed to have the strip hedged off, and—we did."

"And they could not sell the house-lot?"

"No."

"What did they do, since they needed money?" asked Ellen.

"They mortgaged their house," replied Elizabeth grimly.

Ellen stared at her aunts in astonishment. "Were they wealthy when they were young?" she finally asked.

"Not wealthier than some others," said Elizabeth. "They were very proud people. Old Squire Blair would have his coach and span, and solid silver on the table, even if they did not have enough to eat."

Sarah, with a face of sudden distress, exclaimed, "Oh, sister, do you think Esther and Catherine have enough to eat now?"

To Ellen's amazement her Aunt Elizabeth colored violently. "Why should they not have enough to eat?" said she sharply.

Again Ellen strove to digress. "They must have enough, I think," said she. "They have a boarder now, you know."

"A boarder! Esther and Catherine Blair keeping boarders!" exclaimed Elizabeth.

"Only one boarder," explained Ellen hastily, "and he gave me the impression that they only took him because he really wanted a good home."

"Who is he?" asked Sarah.

"I met him last night at the party," replied Ellen. "His name is King. He is a very distant relative of the Kings here, they told me—or Milly King did.

"It seems that he is rather out of health. He has had typhoid, I believe, and the physicians ordered rest and quiet.

"So he came here. Milly thinks overwork had something to do with his breakdown. When he arrived here there was no hotel; but he found people of his family name, and Milly's brother gave up his room one night. Then they found board for him at the Blairs."

"Did you meet this young man, Ellen?" asked Sarah.

"Yes, Aunt Sarah," replied Ellen. When Sarah inquired how she liked him she answered:

"I thought him very interesting. Of course, when it comes to liking or not liking, that is another matter. I have seen him only once, Aunt Sarah."

"Sarah, how absurd you are!" cried Elizabeth sharply. "How can the child tell whether she likes him or not when she has seen him only once?"

AFTER dinner, Ellen sat beside a window facing the wide field between the Knox and Blair houses. The Blair sisters and their boarder were having tea. Suddenly the light in the dining-room flashed out, and another appeared in two windows in the second story.

"They have given him old Squire Blair's room," said Sarah.

"That has a fireplace and a stove in it," said Elizabeth.

Ellen said nothing. She was gazing intently at the field. She leaned forward and stared. She told herself it could not be possible, yet it seemed—

"It seems to me that I see—" began Ellen.

"See what?" asked Elizabeth a bit sharply.

"What did you think you saw?" asked Sarah.

Ellen faced her aunts with sudden resolution. "You can both of you think what you choose," said she firmly. "You may think me out of my head; but I saw—and I see now,"—she glanced out of the window again,—"a tall white figure moving up and down that hedged-in strip."

Sarah gasped.

"You are not well, Ellen," said her Aunt Elizabeth.

"Come here and look for yourselves."

Sarah obeyed.

"Well?" asked Ellen.

Sarah gasped again. "You look, Elizabeth," said she faintly.

"I wish to have nothing to do with such nonsense," replied Elizabeth, but all the time she was moving toward the window.

"Well, did you see?" asked Ellen, when her Aunt Elizabeth had also looked.

Elizabeth Knox spoke more sharply than beseemed a Knox and a lady. "I see a fog rising over that low land, if that is what you mean," she said. She opened the door and called to Corinda to bring a lamp.

Sarah leaned over her niece and whispered, "I saw; but don't ask your Aunt Elizabeth again."

Corinda entered tumultuously. "Oh," she began, "have you looked out at the field?"

"Let me hear no more of such foolish fancies!" said Elizabeth Knox sternly.

However, Corinda was in her way as firm as her mistress. "I saw an angel

walking up and down that strip of land in the field," she said, "an angel all in white, with great wings. I saw it, and I ain't going to say I didn't for anybody!"

Elizabeth laughed her unpleasant laugh of sarcasm. "You speak as if you had seen so many angels that you know exactly how they look, Corinda."

"This is the first angel I ever saw," returned Corinda stoutly; "but I saw that one, and I know. What else has great white wings except an angel?"

"White owls," returned Elizabeth.

"I darse ye to look out of that window and tell me there's no angel!" said Corinda. Then suddenly her manner changed. "She's gone," she said faintly.

"Yes, she has gone," Ellen and Sarah echoed.

"The fog has lifted," said Elizabeth. "It is time we went to bed, or next we shall be seeing all the prophets walking up and down that strip of our field. You will if the fog settles again. I shall not. I have not lived a long life in a foggy world for nothing."

THE days went on, and the subject of the vision in the hedged inclosure was not resumed. George King began to call quite regularly on Ellen. Elizabeth Knox had inquired concerning his desirability from Mrs. John King, who was warmly responsive. "He is irreproachable," she declared. "John inquired in Boston."

They were returning from a concert one evening, under the old trees where the lamplight made little impression. Ellen had a sensation of enjoyment in guiding this tall, broad-shouldered young man, still a little weak from his illness, through the pleasant gloom.

"I want to talk to you, and I have to talk very fast," said George King. "I want to tell you a lot before we reach your aunts' house, and I'm afraid there won't be time. Let us walk very slowly."

"I fear they are very much reduced in circumstances," said Ellen.

"Well, that was what I thought. When I first went to the Blair house I could not avoid seeing that the table damask and other linen, although very fine, was fairly embroidered with the most exquisite mending, to cover the ravages of time. And I was almost sure, from the number and thinness of the blankets, that the ladies had robbed themselves for my comfort. I was quite disturbed about it, when, lo! packages arrived, and now there are great fluffy blankets and beautiful, heavy linen and damask. Then I suspected at first that the only warm place in the house was my room, and the only one where midnight oil was not spared, and now the house is of summer heat, and there are nightly illuminations."

"How very strange!" said Ellen. She pondered. "They may have had jewels or other articles of value which they disposed of," she suggested hesitatingly.

"No. I thought of that; but the old rings still glimmer on their delicate hands, and the old brooches still fasten their laces."

"I wonder," said Ellen reflectively, "if they have had money left to them?"

"No, they have not, Miss Knox. They know no more than I do where these things come from."

Ellen started.

"I KNOW that, because I was sitting in their library toward dusk one day when they came in. The first I knew of their presence was one soft voice saying, 'Sister, can you imagine where all the things and the money come from?' and the response, 'No, sister, I can not.'"

"How very strange!" said Ellen.

"Well, what do you make of my unknown quantity?"

"I do not know. It is very strange."

She and George shook hands and said good night at the door of the house.

The next day Miss Sarah Knox went to Boston, although the day was raw.

"I don't know one single errand Sarah could have had," Elizabeth said in a puzzled way.

her aunts what George King had told her; but something checked her.

About a week later Elizabeth went to Boston, and brought home a little box of handkerchiefs. She looked cold and weary.

"Your furs aren't very warm, Aunt Elizabeth," Ellen remarked.

"You said you were intending to buy some new furs," Sarah began.

"I have changed my mind," replied Elizabeth.

ELLEN was housed with her aunts for three days on account of a snow storm; but on the second day George King came, in a sleigh. Ellen and he sat alone for an hour; for Sarah was nursing Elizabeth, who had an attack of rheumatism.

Suddenly George King proposed. "I have always known my own mind in a twinkling," said he. "I fell in love with you the minute I saw you. I dare say you didn't fall in love with me."

Ellen turned white. Then she laughed. "No, I really did not," said she.

"But you can. Now, don't you think you can? Please do think you can, and tell me straight, because there is nothing I dislike so much as uncertainty!"

George King rose and caught her in his arms. "Please do fall in love with me!"

"I can't," faltered Ellen, laughing again.

"Oh, dear me! why not?"

"Because—it is perfectly ridiculous, but I have," gasped Ellen.

"That is a sensible girl," declared King.

They heard Sarah's step on the stairs. George had just time to seat himself by the window when she entered.

"How is Miss Elizabeth?" inquired George King affably.

"She is dressed and coming downstairs, although I told her not to," said Sarah.

"It is a very hard storm," observed George King irrelevantly. He stared out of the window. In the field the box borders of the inclosure were quite covered.

"May I ask why that strip is hedged in from the rest of the field, Miss Sarah?"

Then he started. "Why," he cried, "it can't be that those dear old ladies are coming out in all this storm!"

Ellen started up. "You must not go out in the snow," she said with authority to George. She threw a wrap over her shoulders and ran out. She was a strong, wiry girl. She pushed and propped and pulled. All three emerged from the drift and entered the house. Sarah and Elizabeth stood by the open door of the sitting-room. The fire leaped on the hearth, giving out a shower of golden sparks.

"Good afternoon," said the Knox sisters.

"Good afternoon," said the Blair sisters.

They were almost spent, poor, fragile old ladies.

"Ellen," directed Elizabeth, "bring some wine for the Misses Blair, and ask Corinda to make some tea immediately."

Ellen obeyed. George followed her.

"What made you come?" she asked him. "My aunts will not like it."

"Neither of us has any business in there for a minute or so. No outside person has. Tell me what it is all about."

"It is that hedged-in strip of field."

"I supposed so. Tell me quick, while you are getting the wine."

Ellen told him what she knew, rapidly. She did not omit what she had seen out in the field that moonlight night.

"I saw it too," said George in an awed voice. "And I thought it was the ragged edge of my fever. And—they saw it?"

Ellen looked at him breathless, as she was opening the little wine locker in the dining-room.

"Yes; I heard them exclaim and run. Poor Miss Esther nearly fainted."

"Do you suppose we all saw the fog?" asked Ellen.

"Call it we saw the fog," said George.

IN the sitting-room the four women sat in a semicircle before the hearth fire. Esther set her wine-glass on a little table near by, and her sister Catherine followed her example. Then Esther spoke:

"We have just made the discovery."

Elizabeth and Sarah colored. Each stole a furtive glance at the other.

"Yes," said Catherine. "Your name was on that box with the beautiful furs which has just arrived. They had erased it; but it was still plain. Then we knew."

"Then we knew," said Esther.

Elizabeth and Sarah sat with eyes fixed upon the fire.

Esther Blair spoke again. "For years," said she in her sweet voice, "we have had from time to time mysterious boxes and parcels. We never dreamed who sent them. We should have been desperate without these mysterious gifts. We had no income. We could not have paid the interest on the mortgage; but, although it was paid, Lawyer Bascom would not tell us by whom. Now we know."

"Now we know," said Catherine.

"After we had spent the mortgage money as carefully as we could there was nothing left," said Esther. "It was worse, perhaps, than you knew."

"It must have been," said Sarah, with a sob. "I did not know it was so bad; did you, sister?"

"We never dreamed of you," went on Esther. "Then to-day we made the discovery, and we came over."

"I did not know that Elizabeth was sending things, and she did not know that I was," said Sarah in an uncertain voice.

Then Elizabeth Knox stood up and faced the others. She held her chin up with a grand air. She, the giver of gifts that would have been spurned if not given secretly, the invader of the pride of others, revealed the only reason in the world that could justify givers and receivers.

"We gave," stated Elizabeth Knox, "because we loved you."

"And we accept as you gave, because we love you," said Esther Blair.

Elizabeth sat down. The firelight shone upon them all—enemies who had loved, not hated, after the brief flame of that old contention had died out.

GEORGE and Ellen, apart by a window, gazed out on the field. The storm had ceased.

"I see nothing there now," whispered Ellen.

"Nothing is there," George whispered back. "The battle is over."

*"'May I ask why that strip is hedged in from the rest of the field, Miss Sarah?'"*

"Are you sure you are not cold?" inquired Ellen.

"Sure. Now, Miss Knox, if you know, tell me, and relieve my mind from a strain. I am living with unsolved problems. Unknown quantities haunt my waking and sleeping hours. Assist me to discover them, or I will not answer for the consequences."

"If I can," said Ellen soberly.

"Well," said George King, "as you know, I am boarding with the Misses Blair. If ever there were ladies—well, they are thoroughbred to the core. But there are some very queer things. In the first place, why did they ever consent to take a boarder, no matter what his social status?"

When Sarah returned on an afternoon train she was not communicative. She mentioned that she had matched her lilac silk in some ribbon for her lace overdress.

"Well, I never heard of such a thing! Was that all you bought?" said Elizabeth.

"It was all I needed," replied Sarah, after a slight hesitation.

Ellen had a strong impression that her Aunt Sarah was concealing something, and she wondered if her Aunt Elizabeth shared that impression. To her amazement, Elizabeth questioned no more. She suddenly flushed herself.

The next afternoon Ellen noticed the expressman stop at the Blair house. She was on the verge of exclaiming, of telling

Through the slanting drive of the gray storm were visible two figures progressing toward the Knox house.

"What a pity Sam is not here with the sleigh!" cried George. "I will put on my coat and help them."

Sarah stared at the dim, wavering figures, and her face was ashy. "They can't be—coming here!" she stammered.

Elizabeth entered. "What is that? Who can't be coming here?" she cried.

"The Misses Blair," said George King. "I must go and help them. There is a terrible drift at the gate."

Elizabeth also turned pale. "They are not coming here," she said sternly. "They will not try to pass the drift at our gate."